

## Aberystwyth University

### *Cherríe Moraga and the Disruption of Psychoanalysis*

Jacobs, Elizabeth

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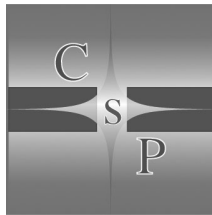
# Theatres of Thought



# Theatres of Thought: Theatre, Performance and Philosophy

Edited by

Daniel Watt and Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe



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# INTRODUCTION

DANIEL WATT  
AND DANIEL MEYER-DINKGRÄFE

In the autumn of 2004, colleagues in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at the University of Wales Aberystwyth began their endeavours of spelling out common grounds and mutual interests in their wide-ranging research. *Theatre, Performance and Philosophy* emerged as one of the distinctive research groups, later formalised as a departmental research centre (*Centre for Theatre, Performance and Philosophy, CTPP*). The core members of that centre, with their research foci in the context of CTPP, are, in alphabetical order, **Alison Forsyth** (continental philosophy and the hermeneutics of performance: Gadamer, Benjamin, Weil, Sartre), **Richard Gough** (cultural theory of archives, food, cookery, travel and tourism), **Karoline Gritzner** (critical theory: Adorno and Lacan), **Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe** (CTPP chair, consciousness studies and Indian philosophy, especially Vedanta), **David Ian Rabey** (eroticism, death and time), and **Daniel Watt** (deconstruction, ethics, postmodernism and performance, especially puppet theatre). Under the auspices of CTPP, a series of research seminars were organised, with speakers from the universities of Reading, Lancaster Staffordshire Chester, London (Royal Holloway), Newcastle East Anglia and Liverpool (John Moores). CTPP was also involved in a number of conferences organised and hosted in Aberystwyth.

This local development at Aberystwyth coincided with a development across the UK: the establishment of the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA), in early 2005, and the establishment of a working group *Theatre, Performance and Philosophy* (TPP) within TaPRA, chaired by Meyer-Dinkgräfe and Watt. So far this working group has convened at the 2005, 2006 and 2007 annual TaPRA conferences in Manchester, London and Birmingham, respectively. At these conferences it has enjoyed wide participation from across the UK and beyond.

With Watt moving from Aberystwyth to Loughborough and Meyer-Dinkgräfe from Aberystwyth to Lincoln in 2005 and 2007, respectively,



CTPP expanded its base beyond Aberystwyth, in line with its founding statutes. This expansion included initiatives such as *Schismogenesis: An Unavowable Community*; a postgraduate and staff research group based in the English and Drama Department of Loughborough University. The aim of such a grouping is to provide an opportunity to discuss critical, theoretical and philosophical papers in relation to drama, performance and literature. Whilst primarily a forum for drama postgraduates this *schismogenesis*, or fracture, is not designed to divide but rather to complement the work in English. In such contexts philosophy forms the basis of continued interdisciplinary focus for theatre and performance studies.

Within the practice / theory divide there are frequent criticisms of the push to make the study of theatre articulate itself through the work of philosophical discourse. Certainly, theatre borrows heavily from the philosophical canon (and beyond) to transform its practice into words. However, this is not a simple deployment of philosophy to lend weight to a field of study. Theatre, fundamentally, makes things *appear*. Philosophy, fundamentally, makes things *appear*. Philosophy is at work in all disciplines. The issue is less about bringing them together but rather articulating the fact that they, like science and art, have never been truly apart.

Theatre has been gradually increasing its theoretical articulation over decades, fascinated by the possibility of transforming thought into spectacle. Many current publications are doing a welcome job of articulating such theoretical groundings, especially for the student of drama: Reinelt and Roach's *Critical Theory and Performance*, Buse's *Drama + Theory* and Fortier's *Theatre/Theory* are but a few. With the turn towards Performance Studies, philosophical trajectories of the 'performative' obviously supplied a core grounding to the 'paradigm' shift supposedly at work in such a turn; equally a broadening inter-disciplinarity infused the field with philosophical terms borrowed (twice) through such disciplinary encounters. More recently though there is an emerging desire to deal with philosophical issues in their own terms, and to clearly label them as such. A recent, and excellent, example would be Krasner and Saltz's edited collection *Staging Philosophy*, which offers a collection of essays that address philosophy and the theatre as kindred modes of questioning. Undoubtedly the 'thinking' of theatre cannot replace its actual practice, but it does offer means by which to consider the relevance of the form of theatre in the contemporary world. The 2007 TaPRA conference at the University of Birmingham saw many of the working groups considering the issue of ethics as a pressing issue in their diverse thematic

areas of research. So perhaps philosophy – whilst a somewhat awkward and apparently abstracted companion to the theatre – is increasingly revealing itself as foundational to the continued importance of theatre and performance, both as entertainment and cultural criticism.

Perhaps a legitimate suspicion of philosophy arises from its occasional appropriation of the theatre to make manifest its own agendas (an appropriation that, in its reverse, has been noted above). There is in a sense no escaping this. But what does theatre benefit from when presented with a quintessentially expository work that delivers ‘philosophy’? An example of this might be Sartre’s *Kean*, recently staged at the Apollo Theatre in 2007. The endlessly self-reflective hall of mirrors that is the stage provides the perfect (or so one might think) environment for Sartre’s preoccupations with authenticity. However, and this was not entirely the fault of the actors and the staging, the play disappoints with its clumsy unpacking of its philosophical issues in the context of a complex, and tempestuous, biography of a notorious actor. Little wonder that theatre finds itself unsure of the extent to which philosophical speculation has a home within its walls. Here we might also cite Brecht – whose theoretical writings, have provided the foundation for many philosophically grounded attempts to employ the theatre for various political agendas – and any number of directors and practitioners who have sought to locate a certain type of *thinking* at the heart of their practice. But at what point does theatre acquire its own ground – a ‘thing-in-itself’?

In considering the question ‘Why are there essents rather than nothing?’, at the opening of *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger comments on the moments in which such a question arises:

The question looms in moments of great despair, when things tend to lose all their weight and all meaning becomes obscured. Perhaps it will strike but once like a muffled bell that rings into our life and gradually dies away. It is present in moments of rejoicing, when all things around us are transfigured and seem to be there for the first time, as if it might be easier to think they are not than to understand that they are and are as they are. The question is upon us in boredom, when we are equally removed from despair and joy, and everything about us seems so hopelessly commonplace that we no longer care whether anything is or is not (1987: 1)

The passage is a particular concise description of that doubt that arises from extremes, and these extremes can arise at any moment. Some of the terms will be most familiar to theatre audiences: ‘despair’, ‘rejoicing’, ‘transfigured’, ‘boredom’ and ‘joy’, and might even describe the

emotional journey of many productions. Philosophy does not sit outside of life, contentedly commenting on its minutiae, but rather figures itself as an event deeply structured within life, and theatre is also such an event. Particular philosophical methods will always seem both appropriate and inappropriate to theatre. They are only other means by which to ask theatre to *perform* itself. But it is not the task of this book to defend, or champion particular schools of thought, or particular aspects of practice for that matter. Perhaps it is the task of philosophy to only offer means by which questions can arise, issues such as ethics, existence and responsibility. Why is there *theatre*, rather than nothing? – a question which philosophy also asks of itself; a question unanswered (and unanswerable) here, in this book, but perhaps answered in myriad forms on the stage, if we give it a theatre to think the thought that is most proper to it, and to put that thought into play.

The essays collected in this volume arise from the 2005 and 2006 TaPRA conferences and papers presented under the auspices of CTPP at Aberystwyth. After careful consideration we have decided not to foist our editorial decisions on the sequence in which the papers are grouped for reading—instead, they appear in alphabetical order, allowing readers to make connections and associations based on their own reading.

The papers represent a wide range of approaches and ways in which philosophy may relate to theatre and performance. **Vasiliki Angelaki** considers phenomenology as a philosophical / theoretical approach to understanding theatre text, with reference to work by playwright Martin Crimp. **Carina Bartleet** explores Julia Kristeva's conceptual reworking of abjection and its implications for contexts of dramaturgy and theatre. **Lilja Blumenfeld** analyses five different productions of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in the context of the real and imagined sites of Venice. **Elpida-Sophia Christianaki** goes back to Greek tragedy, the three versions of Socrates in Xenophon, Plato and Aristotle, and Nietzsche's views on Greek tragedy and philosophy. **Laura Cull** discusses the work of Chicago-based performance group *Goat Island* with reference, among others, to Deleuze. **Matthew Goulish**, artistic director of *Goat Island*, responds to Cull's intervention. **Dongning Feng** takes us beyond Europe and the USA to China: he describes and evaluates developments in contemporary Chinese performing arts against the backdrop of political developments in that country. **Elizabeth Jacobs** relates Chicana/o literature and criticism to the discourse of psychoanalysis. **Carl Lavery** offers an example of performative writing, reflecting on the practice itself while engaging in it, triggered by his experience of Graeme Miller's performance work *Linked*. **Chris Megson**'s contribution draws critical

attention to the phenomenon of tribunal plays in the 1990s. **Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe** takes up Jill Dolan's concept of the *utopian performative* and develops it further in the context of current consciousness studies. **Michelle Piasecka** investigates ways in which performance (in the context of live art) may be used practically in primary school contexts. **Simon Piasecki** focuses his research on a specific historical period, that of early modernism, and the impact of the philosophical discourse of the time in particular on Meyerhold and Stanislavsky. **Jurriën Rood** turns the usual relation between philosophy and theatre, in which philosophy has the role of explaining, of helping to better understand phenomena and experiences of theatre, on its head, arguing that philosophy can in fact learn from Stanislavsky's practice about the relation between mind and body. **David Shirley**, finally, discusses the centrality, or otherwise, of *character* to drama and theatre.

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## CHAPTER ONE

VASILIKI ANGELAKI

### PERFORMING PHENOMENOLOGY: THE THEATRE OF MARTIN CRIMP

This paper is in part devoted to a brief understanding regarding the advantages of phenomenology as a philosophical/theoretical approach to the analysis of theatrical texts and in part to the brief application of phenomenological concepts to two recent plays by Martin Crimp, *The Country* and *Fewer Emergencies*. I aim to propose and demonstrate that phenomenology finds a natural partner in the medium of theatre, allowing for an incisiveness that complements the material being examined. My analysis will include references to pivotal philosophical texts within the phenomenological tradition and to studies which have adapted phenomenology to the needs of a theatre-related critical discourse. Specifically, I will discuss Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Signs*, also referring to Stanton B. Garner's *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* and Bert O. States' *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*.

Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* is a unique text, which carries an almost poetic quality in its choice of vocabulary and grasps the intricacies of the individual's relationship with his/her private territory in a profundity that is captivating for the reader. The theoretical horizon of phenomenology is especially encouraging for such spatial analyses, as Bachelard's text proves through its account of the significance of the different locations in the house, which are examined in direct analogy to the consciousness of the inhabitant who perceives them. Bachelard's study indeed provides true insights into the corporeal and psychological relationship cultivated between the individual and his/her environment. Addressing the question "Why phenomenology," Bachelard suggests: "Only phenomenology—that is to say, consideration of the *onset of the image* in an individual consciousness—can help us to restore the

subjectivity of images and to measure their fullness, their strength and their transsubjectivity” (xix). If we are to justify the purposefulness of a phenomenological approach to the study of a theatrical text, Bachelard’s proposition helps us understand the affinities between this area of philosophy and performance analysis. Specifically, phenomenology enables the critic or academic researcher to account for more profound layers of meaning, appreciating the importance of the scenic image as it is placed before the spectators’ consciousness and accounting for the complicated nature of the characters’ motility and corporeality within their given stage habitat.

*The Poetics of Space* is a seminal work in the field of phenomenology in that it is devoted to one specific area, which is a main concern of the discipline, and which it navigates extensively. Space, of course has also been a primary focal point for the phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who devotes a lengthy chapter to it in his landmark work *Phenomenology of Perception*. Having referred to Bachelard’s work though, I would like to especially concentrate on Merleau-Ponty’s contribution in the field of a phenomenological account of language. Language is a major concern not only in *Phenomenology of Perception*, but in his work *Signs* as well. As is the case with the understanding of space, corporeality is the essential prism through which language is understood as well. That is, language is as much a mental process as it is a physical one. Expanding on the corporeality of language Merleau-Ponty proposes that, while speaking, the individual achieves intersubjectivity, simultaneously existing as a speaker and hearer of his/her own words, sharing this communal experience with any interlocutors and/or listeners. This communication process, as understood from a phenomenological viewpoint, enhances the sense of correlation between the producer and the receiver of an utterance. If we link this concept directly to the theatre, we understand its usefulness for the decoding of the relationship developed and sustained between the speaking character and the auditorium. Therefore, the prioritization of the sensory aspect of language, which becomes a physical entity when it is embodied in speech, is directly relatable to the critical analysis of theatre, as it helps us read the play beyond its written form. In this way, the critic is enabled to apprehend the essence of the play as a ‘lived’ text, one that belongs partially to the page and partially to the stage, meant to be voiced and not merely read. In other words, this aspect of phenomenology saves us from producing an analysis of a theatrical text which leans unevenly towards the literary, failing to adequately account for an essential feature of the play, which is only materialized in performance.

Although a phenomenological approach holds various advantages, the existing scholarship in the field of phenomenology and the theatre is not, to date, as wide as one might expect. It is not, of course, an unexplored territory, but it certainly lacks the prominence of other philosophical and theoretical approaches more commonly applied to theatre-related analysis. I would like to mention here two leading studies in the field, published in the mid 1980s and mid 1990s respectively. These are Bert O. States' *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* and Stanton Garner's *Bodied Spaces*. States' work operates as an application of phenomenology to the theatre, but it is also, and perhaps primarily, a theoretical work, which contributes its own distinctive viewpoint to the area it investigates. States' critical incisiveness is undeniable and it is in part owing to the fact that he does not adopt a phenomenological frame of reference *de facto*, but he also takes into perspective the limitations of other approaches, which are surpassable in a phenomenological discussion. It might be suggested that *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* remains to date the quintessential and most rewarding text, which a researcher focusing on phenomenology and the theatre might encounter.

Stanton Garner's *Bodied Spaces* acknowledges a debt to States' work, but it also makes a seminal contribution in its own right, especially in terms of its extensive and detailed application of phenomenological concepts to the work of contemporary influential playwrights. This makes the work a valuable point of reference for those focusing on post-war theatre. Moreover, the diversity of the text, demonstrated through the focus on playwrights ranging from Samuel Beckett to Sam Shepard and from Harold Pinter to Caryl Churchill, establishes *Bodied Spaces* as an inexhaustible source. The reason for this is that its case studies can function as paradigms for the fruitful application of phenomenological theory to the theatre, employed as references for the examination of the work of other playwrights with similar concerns. In both States' and Garner's texts questions of corporeality and space, as well as corporeality and language, also articulated by phenomenologist philosophers, are central. In the final part of my paper I will pursue an understanding of these issues in Martin Crimp's plays *The Country* and *Fewer Emergencies*.

In the majority of Crimp's writing spatiality is a recurring concern. This might be expressed in the depiction of the individual's relationship with his/her surroundings, the function of objects within a given locale, or the selection of vocabulary in the characters' dialogue, which brims with place names or metaphors. This is one of the factors that advocate a phenomenological approach to Crimp's work and *The Country* is a characteristic example for this observation. Opening at the Royal Court

Theatre Downstairs in May 2000, the play is a tale of marital dysfunction. The protagonists are Corinne and Richard, who move from the city to the country in an attempt to save their marriage. The basic problem is that Richard, a doctor, is a heroin addict. What Corinne is unaware of is that he is also adulterous and has supported this move to the country so as to resume his affair with the twenty-five year old Rebecca, another drug user, who has also relocated there. After Rebecca has taken an overdose, Richard brings the comatose Rebecca to the house and leaves shortly afterwards for house calls to his patients. When Rebecca regains consciousness she begins a tense conversation with Corinne.

As regards the issue of the subject and his/her *locus*, *The Country* offers itself to a phenomenological approach. First of all, the analogy can be supported in terms of the characters' territorial behaviour. No scene in the play is as exemplary of this territoriality as the one where Corinne encounters Rebecca. The young woman is the outsider who displays an assertive behaviour within Corinne's domestic environment and the attempt to establish herself as an equal or even superior interlocutor to Corinne triggers the latter's defence mechanism. As Corinne affirms:

– This is where we live. This is where our children will live. This *is* our home. (35)

To which Rebecca replies:

– Exactly. Well exactly: you and your children have nowhere to go / back to. (35)

Rebecca's questioning of the fact that Corinne is spatially rooted in her home and the overt challenging of her permanence in the familial *locus* instigates Corinne's firm response. As she asserts:

– This is our home. We don't want to 'go back'. We are a family. We are here permanently. (35)

The assertion of authority within her space originates from Corinne's attachment to the home, which she views as the intimate territory where she can reclaim her marriage and build a prosperous life for her family. It is the place that has been chosen for precisely this purpose and has been invested with emotional expectations. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard explores such intricate relationships by employing the analogy of the nest, suggesting that a home operates for the individual as a shelter does for an animal (90-104). The process of attachment to one's space then, from a



phenomenological perspective, is in equal degrees mental and physical, reaching further than a mere psychological justification of the subject's behaviour (91). Regarding nests, or homes, Bachelard's text traces the crucial factor for the enhancement of their sheltering quality in their 'lived' nature, in their reciprocal rewarding relationship with their inhabitant (90-104). As a consequence, the domestic space, which bears its resident's projections of happiness, operates to instil confidence in the individual, who will be eager to defend his/her establishment within this space. As Bachelard concludes:

Our house, apprehended in its dream potentiality, becomes a nest in the world, and we shall live there in complete confidence if, in our dream, we really participate in the sense of security of our first home. [. . .] The nest, quite as much as the oneiric house, and the oneiric house quite as much as the nest—[. . .] knows nothing of the hostility of the world. (103)

In Crimp's play this is precisely the quality with which Corinne endows her new home, which she views as the first step towards the fulfilment of her dream of an unperturbed family life. When Rebecca appears as a threat to what her house represents, Corinne becomes increasingly possessive, as demonstrated by her choice of vocabulary and by her attempts to obliterate the threat. By protecting the house, Corinne essentially protects herself and the family structure she strives to sustain.

Crimp's *Fewer Emergencies* staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in September 2005 is a quite different play from *The Country* in that, as opposed to the latter, it entirely disregards traditional narrative forms. *Fewer Emergencies* is the collective title of the play, taken from the third piece in order of performance. The other two are *Whole Blue Sky* and *Face to the Wall*, and, like *Fewer Emergencies*, their individual length in performance does not exceed twenty minutes. A small group of unnamed characters narrate, while place and time are only described in the stage directions as "blank" (5, 23, 39). The common denominator in the three pieces is the issue of social class in a capitalist society, its demands and its repercussions. The stage is almost bare, with a few white desks and chairs as the only set. Nothing actually happens on stage other than the narrating, and, yet, everything does, by virtue of the ability of language to create mental visualizations in the spectators' consciousness. The sparsely decorated set and the suspension of physical action create an ideal phenomenological theatrical environment, as language is enabled to emerge as the key component in the play. In order to grasp the importance of this it is necessary to follow a phenomenological approach where language, materialized through speech, is treated as a corporeal entity,

which is as much physical and concrete as a practical enactment would be. It is difficult to find a text which more accurately accounts for this than Merleau-Ponty's "On the Phenomenology of Language," published in *Signs*. This is where the notion of language as a gesture is developed, phrased in these words:

the spoken word is pregnant with a meaning which can be read in the very texture of the linguistic gesture [. . .] and yet is never contained in that gesture, every expression always appearing to me as a trace, no idea being given to me except in transparency, and every attempt to close our hand on the thought which dwells in the spoken word leaving only a bit of verbal material in our fingers. (89)

As Merleau-Ponty suggests, then, speech may not be tangible, but it has the power of generating imagery which lingers in thought as persistently as a physical depiction of events would. Consequently, speech *is* a gesture, as it is endowed with as much corporeality as a physical motion of the body. As a gesture affects its recipient, so speech achieves an effect on the listener. In the case of the theatre, and especially in a text such as *Fewer Emergencies*, where, unimpeded by a cluttered stage, language is elevated to the highest position in performance, Merleau-Ponty's text is particularly relevant. The characters' verbal behaviour not only compensates for the static nature of the play, it is also the essential factor for its effectiveness. By following the narration of images, to which a great amount of effort has been devoted in order to ensure precision, appropriate articulation and pace of delivery, the spectators of *Fewer Emergencies* remain alert, aware and connected with a spectacle which invites them in a journey of decoding and imagination.

My aim in this paper has been to suggest that phenomenology can be a highly rewarding approach for theatre-related analysis, as it helps us follow a trail from the page to the stage, accounting for vital aspects of the play(s) which we are discussing. In order to substantiate this I have considered seminal texts within the discipline, written by philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gaston Bachelard. Moreover, in order to prove that the precepts of phenomenology translate to the requirements of theatre criticism, I have referred to works by Bert O. States and Stanton B. Garner, who have offered two compelling texts which apply phenomenology to the study of performance. Finally, I have applied the phenomenological writings of Bachelard and Merleau-Ponty to Crimp's *The Country* and *Fewer Emergencies* so as to demonstrate the complementation between the theatrical text and the theory, or the theory and the theatrical text. Of course, I have only examined a small fragment

of the two plays, or a minute fragment of the totality of Crimp's theatre. There is a lot more to be said regarding the corporeality of language, the function of space and the objects within it, the performer's body, as well as about stage and soundscapes. It is not possible to visit all these considerations here. However, this paper has hopefully functioned to trace the extent of what it is possible to do with phenomenology in a theatrical analysis, especially when the texts discussed are as inviting as Crimp's work.

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## CHAPTER TWO

CARINA BARTLEET

### THE SCENE OF DISGUST: REALISM AND ITS MALCONTENTS, THE AUDIENCE AND THE ABJECT

The condition of abjection, from its etymological roots, contains the possibility of both the performative and the theatrical. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, at least in Anglophone parts of the world, the origin of “abject” is late Middle English from the Latin roots of “reject” – or *abjectus* – *ab* meaning “away” and *jacere* “to throw”. In this sense, when something is abjected it is thrown away. Etymologically, abjection is potentially a gestural act – a pushing away, a deliberate rejection: semantically a method of putting something out as rubbish. This sense does not do justice to the nuance with which this word is used in an everyday context and still more with regard to its usage within a philosophical context. Julia Kristeva’s study *Powers of Horror* is an important and useful interrogation of the term, which is also a significant reworking of it from a psychoanalytic perspective. It re-reads the term through Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger*, and René Girard’s discussion on the relationship between violence and the sacred. This chapter aims to explore Kristeva’s conceptual reworking of abjection and consider the implications that this might have in dramaturgical and theatrical contexts. Illustration will be primarily through the consideration of the written text in performance, thus opening up the possibility of exploring literary contexts, alongside Kristeva’s own but also an extension of it into the realm of performance.

#### **Abjection: Non-object of the Enquiry**

The abject, according to Kristeva, is located through its liminal status as neither a subject nor object. Thus, she asserts:

The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine [...] What is abject is not my correlative, which providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject only has one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. (Kristeva 1982, 1—2)

Yet, at the same time, for Kristeva, “[o]n the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards” (2). In Kristeva’s formulation, the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* becomes reformulated into I abject therefore I am and, in being, I abject. This becomes clearer in her frequently-quoted discussion of her own food loathing – that of the skin that forms on the surface of milk.

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, [...] I experience a gagging sensation and, still further down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk [...] separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. ‘I’ want none of that element, sign of their desire; ‘I’ do not want to listen, ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it. But since food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me,’ who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*. (2—3)

Furthermore, it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscious [...]. Any crime because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility” (4). Thus, abjection “is immoral, sinister, scheming and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter [...] a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you” (4). What can be discerned from each of these examples is that, if abjection is an abstraction in the sense that it is neither a subject nor an object, it is nonetheless manifest through gestural and corporeal acts. The quotation lists acts that may be familiar through metaphor in everyday life but they are also deeds and events that can be constituents of Victorian melodrama, and evident in the plots of

*Grand Guignol*, realism, naturalism and Revenge Tragedy to list only a few examples. Like some aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis itself, many of these acts are commonplace plots for the dramatic text.

Realism and Naturalism's rose to prominence in the theatre during the second half of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth and were broadly contemporary to the rise of psychoanalysis. In his study, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, W. B. Worthen discusses what he terms the performance rhetoric of stage realism and observing that it embraces a number of difference dramatic genres, which:

stage the text within its rhetorical priorities: a proscenium stage, often implying a box set, a fourth wall discrimination between stage and audience; objects that constitute both character and action; the necessary activities of production from the realm of the audience's legitimate interpretation. The rhetoric of realism opposes the visible and integrated scene onstage to the invisible indeterminate, absent scene of the spectator's interpretation. (Worthen 1992, 5)

Examples of dramatic realism and naturalism such as Ibsen's *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler* and Zola's stage version of (the infamous novel) *Thérèse Raquin* share a number of characteristics when considered in relation to Worthen's description. Although one should be wary of collapsing a discussion of the conventions of stage naturalism with realism, at first glance, all three plays appear to adhere to the convention of the illusion of the fourth wall between the audience and the action presented onstage. In incorporating a clear demarcation between the onstage action and the audience via the illusory fourth wall, such conventions appear to deny the possibility of a theatrical abject because they display a marked respect for and maintenance of a border. Worthen's description of the performance rhetoric of realism appears to endorse this reading when he notes that "The rhetoric of realism opposes the visible and integrated scene onstage to the invisible indeterminate, absent scene of the spectator's interpretation" (5). Such a reading is potentially a reductive one, however; it fails to take into account the role of the audience in constructing meaning within the theatre. If Worthen is correct in his assumption that the role of the audience in meaning making during performance in stage realism is minimized, it would seem that, at least in terms of individual performances of a play, the position of abjection, or non-objectival otherness, is not available.

## Border Crossings: *Ghosts* and Ibsen's Devious Criminals

Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), written quickly during September and October 1881 and revised so it could be published before Christmas of the same year is one play that, famously, has been viewed as controversial, not so much for its performances, as for the outcry and protest its now somewhat oblique references to syphilis engendered (Watts in Ibsen 1964, 10—1). As Peter Watts, a twentieth-century translator of Ibsen's works into English, related:

The uproar against *Ghosts* was the most violent of all the many storms that Ibsen raised. None of the Scandinavian theatres would stage it, and it was not till 1884 that anyone dared to translate it into German. In fact its first performance was not in Europe at all, but was given by a touring company in Chicago. When [...] it was staged in London, the critics labelled it "putrid", "naked loathsomeness" and "an open sewer" (11).

It would seem, in this case, the audience or at least that part of it whose opinions were considered important enough to be committed to print, were far from being passive receivers of meaning made on stage. As Marker and Marker observe when reviewing the performance history of this play: "these early performances of *Ghosts* in London and in Paris at the beginning of the 1890s remain so enmeshed in the critical confusion and recriminations surrounding the play itself that an objective assessment of them in purely artistic terms is hardly possible now" (Marker and Marker 1989, 98). Rather instead, the initial audiences were as involved in the making of meaning within the performance contexts of *Ghosts* as Ibsen was. It is even arguable that the debates surrounding Ibsen's theatre and, especially, its spirited defence has been more important in forming present-day notions of Ibsen's secure place within the modern drama canon.<sup>1</sup>

Dramatic and performance conventions, content and theme all contribute to the making of meaning within the performance context and, in considering *Ghosts* in performance, it is the contention here that it is crucial to consider dramatic and theatrical conventions diachronically. It is one of the strengths of Ibsen's writing that he drew upon the conventions of previous drama and theatre sometimes not to reject but in order to subvert them. The character of Engstrand, with his crippled leg and obvious immorality is one aspect of Ibsen's dramaturgy where the conventions of nineteenth-century melodrama are evident. Whereas, in Victorian melodrama such facets of character can function to signify villainy to an audience, in Ibsen's dramaturgy Engstrand's status as a

possible felon is equivocal. For example, it is unclear whether he was responsible for starting the fire that leads to the destruction of the orphanage Mrs Alving has built in memory of her husband. In this instance, a more nuanced reading of the character can be elucidated through knowledge of theatrical and dramatic conventions employed and rejected by Ibsen.

Thematically, Ibsen's play works within the conventions of realism and naturalism through the recognizably complex psychologies of the characters, most notably of Mrs Alving. Additionally, these conventions are reinforced through their incorporation of the classic realist detective narrative to reveal the shameful secret of Captain Alving's syphilis and the revelation that the son has inherited both this and his father's dissolute behaviour despite Mrs Alving's efforts to remove her son from his father's sphere of influence. Thus, it becomes apparent that Oswald has spent time away from his family at school and in Paris. Ibsen's narrative structure functions to reveal Mrs Alving's efforts to uphold the reputation of her dead husband, Captain Alving's as a good man, whilst simultaneously unravelling the details of his dissolute life: namely his affair with a maid and his syphilitic illness. In this play, syphilis functions as a metaphor for abjection in the sense that it does not respect borders. The narrative can be read as staging Mrs Alving's battle with the abject, from her attempt to reject, to throw away her recollection of her husband in favour of a purified public version. Thus, his fathering of bastards is abjected into an orphanage built in his memory. Ultimately, Mrs Alving's failure in this task is evident through the ambivalent manner in which she succumbs to the state of abjection by accepting the presence of her syphilitic son, urging him to stay with her despite her final act of screaming "I can't bear it [...] never! No, no, no... Yes! No, no" as she stares at him, hands in her hair – a gesture itself familiar to present-day audiences from Edvard Munch's famous *fin de siècle* work, the *Scream* (Ibsen 1964, 102). In this schema, the character of Engstrand becomes an analogue of the abjection. Ostensibly a villain *à la* melodrama, his status as felon, or victim of his social position, or neither remains unresolved. If we read the clues in Ibsen's play as suggestion of Engstrand's guilt in the burning down of the orphanage, then it is arguable that, the character represents what Kristeva describes as "the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a conscience", however, because he also functions as a means by which Mrs Alving slowly reveals the secret she has repressed, Engstrand is both a means by which the abject is unveiled and yet is and an actor in its expulsion or purgation.

Reading Ibsen's *Ghosts* alongside Kristeva's theorization of the abject, it becomes apparent that it contains a paradox: whereas, formally, the



conventions the play draws upon, function through its staging rhetoric to create, and maintain the borders between the onstage performance and the audience of it, the play's content suggests that these borders are deceptive. Symbolically, *Ghosts*'s content or at least its subject matter and plotting, work to undermine the relationship that the play's realist stage rhetoric proclaims. In confronting its early audiences with the spectre of syphilis – a disease that could be passed unseen from person to person via sexual contact and was incurable – the play creates dis-ease in its suggestion that the borders so firmly established between audience, or the unseen, and the scenes enacted before them are themselves illusory. The outrage and disgust which surrounded *Ghosts* and its concomitant difficulty in finding a stage in the 1880s suggests that the fourth wall of realism and naturalism, in performance at the very least, is not just illusory but that illusionism is itself porous. In this play, the audience is never absent in performance but, in maintaining borders that are rendered porous as a result of the subject matter and Ibsen's *verisimilitude*, the audience as the unacknowledged component in the performance are themselves abjected and, confronted by their own effacement and replacement onstage, in being, must themselves abject.

## **Non-realist and Political Theatre in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century – Abjection and the Experiential**

Distant from the zenith of theatrical Naturalism and Realism by approximately a century, the dramas of Edward Bond and Sarah Kane nevertheless display the markers of influence (even if this is expressed as an emphatic rejection of both sets of conventions). Worthen has observed of Bond, who has worked within the constraints of realism, most notably in *Saved* (1965), that he is “oddly the inheritor of one strain of realistic theatricality deriving from Zola and the naturalists: the desire to analyze and expose the working of society through a ‘scientific’ or ‘rational’ art” (91). *Blasted*, Sarah Kane's first professionally-produced play, which must surely have a claim to be the most notorious British play since Howard Brenton's *Romans in Britain* (1980), is itself a play that starts in a realist vein that is exploded, both literally and metaphorically at the end of Scene Two (Kane 2001, 39).<sup>2</sup>

### **Bond – Confronting Abjection**

Bond's *Lear*, a 1971 re-vision of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, is a fascinating text for a number of reasons not least because of its clear

rejection of realism in favour of Epic form. Commenting on Shakespeare's play, Bond has observed that: "Shakespeare's *Lear* is usually seen as an image of high, academic culture. The play is seen as sublime action and the audience are expected to show the depth of their culture by the extent to which they penetrate its mysteries... But the social moral of Shakespeare's *Lear* is this: endure till in time the world will be made right. That's a dangerous moral for us. We have less time than Shakespeare" (Bond in Hay and Roberts 1978, 53, ellipsis in original). Bond's *Lear* covers the same period of time and action as *King Lear*, although it makes a number of alterations most notably reducing Lear's daughters to two, changing their names and reworking the character of Cordelia. Like Shakespeare's play, Bond's contains a number of violent and extremely brutal acts, however. In it people are raped, tortured grotesquely, have their eyes gouged out by a machine, and are killed, all in the name of social control as a civil war breaks out in Lear's former kingdom. The neo-Jacobean tag, which is associated with Bond's work more widely, appears to be justified in the "Preface" to this play through a concentration on violence that is on a far grander scale than is present in *Saved* and still more grotesque than in *King Lear*. Bond has observed somewhat disingenuously "I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners" (Bond 1983, LVII). It is not clear whether Bond sees the irony in his selection of an example that displays clear social construction and nor does it matter especially. Later on in the "Preface" he argues:

There is no evidence of an aggressive *need*, as there is of our sexual and feeding *needs*. We [humans] respond aggressively when we are constantly deprived of our physical and emotional needs, or when we are threatened with this; and if we are constantly deprived and threatened in this way – as human beings now are (sic) – we live in a constant state of aggression. (LVII—LVIII)

Bond's arguments in this preface would not be out of place in a foreword to one of the plays of Naturalism in the nineteenth century. What is significant in this and in the previous quotation from him is not its accuracy so much as the discursive strategies that he draws upon. Here, those discursive strategies attempt to give the feel of a writer who has researched the human condition from a standpoint of an observer and recorder of the behaviour of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Individual humans are not, according to Bond, violent *per se*, but violent acts are manifest in responses to the environment in which they live. Bond's *Lear* is certainly successful in showing how an aggression-inducing environment might be created by the operations of the nation state and government in human

society. In so doing, however, Bond creates a war-torn state for which the ruling classes, regardless of whether this is Lear, his daughters, or even Cordelia as the leader of the freedom fighters: all display an obsession for the proper respect for borders between nation states through the need to continue with the wall that Lear is building at the start of the play.

The narrative arc in tandem with Bond's plotting of onstage action suggests that the cost to society in creating and maintaining the proper borders of state is too high to bear. In Act One, Scene One, Lear the ruler, is accompanied by his daughters, Bodice and Fontanelle, on an inspection of the wall-building project. The scene opens not on Lear, however, but with the discovery of a dead man carried on by two workers, with building materials in the background (1). The significance of the wall as a catalyst creating disorder and chaos within the confines of Lear's kingdom is reinforced by the selection of it as the location for the opening and closing scenes, thus, framing the rest of the action.

One of Lear's early speeches provides an explanation for his wall-building project. According to the character:

I started this wall when I was young. I stopped my enemies in the field, but there were always more of them. How could we ever be free? So I built this wall to keep our enemies out. My people will live behind this wall when I am dead. You may be governed by fools but you'll always live in peace. My wall will make you free. That's why the enemies on *our* borders – the Duke of Cornwall and the Duke of North – try to stop us building it. (3-4)

Lear's speech displays a preoccupation with the creation of impermeable borders in order to exclude his enemies. Through the speech, Bond reveals Lear's contradictory logic; the wall may exclude Lear's enemies but it will set the people he rules over free. Even in this first scene, events at the wall reveal Lear's reasoning to be dubious. In order to accomplish the building of the wall, workers are drafted in by removal from their farmland by compulsion and then housed in sub-standard huts. Local farmers make sorties on the wall overnight in order to sabotage it and Lear is in fear of his own people disobeying him. The death of the man found at the beginning of the play with a pickaxe blow to the head, is blamed on another character, to whom Bond gives the representative title of "Third Worker". Lear orders the Third Worker to be shot for the murder but is interrupted by the announcement from his daughters, Bodice and Fontanelle, that they are to marry Lear's enemies the Dukes of North and Cornwall against their father's wishes and that the wall will be destroyed. Lear's response to betrayal by his daughters is revealed in another long

speech that is worth quoting in its entirety. In the speech, directed at his daughters, Lear exclaims:

My enemies will not destroy my work! I gave my life to these people. I've seen armies on their hands and knees in blood, insane women feeding dead children at their empty breasts, dying men spitting blood at me with their last breath, our brave young men in tears -. But I could bear all this! When I'm dead my people will live in freedom and peace and remember my name, no venerate it!... They are my sheep and if one of them is lost I'd take fire to hell to bring him out. I loved and cared for all my children, and now you've sold them to their enemies! (*He shoots Third Worker, and his body slumps forwards on the post in a low bow.*) There's no more time, it's too late to learn anything. (7, ellipsis in original)

The irony here is that the enemies are not being kept out of Lear's kingdom, they are inside it. For the people Lear rules over, the enemies are the kingdom's rulers. The juxtaposition of words and deeds in the above speech as Lear professes to love and care for his people whilst shooting dead the Third Worker suggests that the character is very far from being a reliable judge of his own nature at this point. The disjunction between the kingly and quasi-Christian discourse in which Lear frames his duty of care towards his subjects and the thoughtless violence that he subjects the Third Worker to, display a collapse of order and ambivalence in his role that becomes an abuse of power. The final line of the speech, "There's no more time, it's too late to learn anything," draws attention to the construction of character and positioning of the audience in Epic theatre as subject to and capable of change, however, in addition it reinforces prejudice of the elderly as being too confirmed in their habits to alter them. Spoken at the beginning of this play by Lear, who, during the course of the play, will undergo a *volte-face* regarding the wall as a consequence of his removal from power and exposure to the cruelties both petty and extreme to which the people in his kingdom are subjected. Lear's final visit to the wall at the play's end is not to inspect but an attempt to damage or destroy it. It is an act that results in Lear's death, shot by the Farmer's Son in order to protect the wall – an action that can be read doubly as a reversal of the action in the opening scene and a repetition of it. For the rulers, the maintenance of the wall as an impermeable border is paramount.

If Bond uses the wall as a material metaphor for the ways in which human rights and freedoms are eroded by the fear of attack (itself a timely notion and one that is in keeping with the manner in which the play has concretized many of the themes in its Shakespearean pre-text), it can also be read through Kristeva's work on the abject as a site of contestation or a

border that is subject to unceasing attack.<sup>3</sup> The journey of Lear as a character in Bond's play is into a state of abjection as he fails to maintain the correct and proper borders between him and his people. In so doing, however, Bond suggests that Lear learns that suffering and abjection are constants within the bounded or guarded state regardless of who holds power. Bond achieves this through a series of encounters, most notably that of Cordelia and her husband, the Gravedigger's Boy.

In Bond's play, Cordelia is transformed from the beloved daughter who, although disowned, comes to her father's aid in Shakespeare's text, to a freedom fighter who eventually gains control of Lear's country in Bond's text, thus undergoing a reverse version of Lear's journey. The Gravedigger's boy who is, arguably, a figure analogous to the Fool in Shakespeare's play, transcends this in the role Bond forges for him. As the man who, like the Fool, is present while Lear is "displaced and threatened" he, as Patricia Hern has observed "shows pity to the old man, seeming to provide an alternative to the father-child bond which has proved so damaging both to Lear and to his daughters" (Hern in Bond 1983, XL). Moreover, because the Gravedigger's boy fails to recognize the man he rescues, he also helps Bond's Lear to a growing realization of the wrongs he has done for the sake of national security. When the soldiers of Bodice and Fontanelle arrive at the Gravedigger Boy's house, they murder him, capture Lear, slaughter the pigs and rape the Boy's pregnant wife, Cordelia, before a Carpenter attempts to intervene and kills at least one of the soldiers with a blow from a chisel.

The soldiers' acts of violence and brutality conclude Act One leaving it unclear whether or not Lear and Cordelia are rescued. The death of the Gravedigger's Boy who, stage directions indicate is shot as he is enfolded in a white sheet, so that the seeping red of the blood provides an emphatic and near clichéd image of his mortality, provides a highly significant turning point for the play. As the climax to Act One, the political point of the war crimes committed by the soldiers on behalf of Bodice and Fontanelle are demonstrated through the very material results of their actions. The death of Lear's saviour and destruction of his family would have made Bond's point about the over-arching and, often, brutal control states can exert over the people subject to the controlling forces, however, he sustains and widens his analysis through two strategies. The first is to reveal that the Gravedigger Boy's wife is Cordelia – that is a usurper of Lear's role – and to establish that this link is not through patrilineage as in *King Lear*, but because of her role as leader of the civil uprising, and eventual ruler of Lear's state. Second, Bond uses the figure of the Gravedigger's Boy as a means by which Lear and the audience are

confronted by the consequences of state-sponsored brutality. When read through the abject, the implicit rejection of humanity and Bond's confrontation of it is manifest.

According to Kristeva the corpse "upsets even more violently [than food loathing] the one who confronts it [...] as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (3). Furthermore, she adds that:

These body fluids, this defilement [...] are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit [...]. [T]he corpse, the most sickening of wastes is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled. The border has become an object. (3-4)

Through the Gravedigger's Boy, Bond offers an alternative view of the abject that mirrors the character with the device of the wall. Despite or perhaps because of his onstage death at the end of Act One, the Gravedigger's Boy returns in Acts Two and Three as a Ghost who keeps Lear company. Act Two, Scene Two is central in the staging of Lear's abjection. Lear, a prisoner of his daughters' state, is held captive in a cell after a show trial when the ghost of the Gravedigger's Boy appears to him. After asking him if he is dead, a question to which the Ghost replies in the affirmative, Lear requests that he fetch his daughters to him. The Ghost brings the daughters but, unlike his real adult daughters, they are youthful phantoms. It is only after Lear is brought face to face with his now-estranged daughters as children that he is able to confront the borders of his own condition:

LEAR.	[...] What colour's my hair?
GHOST.	White.
LEAR.	I'm frightened to look. There's blood on it where I pulled it with these hands.
GHOST.	Let me stay with you, Lear. When I died I went somewhere. I don't know where it was. I waited and nothing happened. And then I started to rot, like a body in the ground. Look at my hands, they're like an old man's. They withered. I'm young but my stomach's shrivelled up and the hair's turned white. Look, my arms! Feel how thin I am. (LEAR <i>doesn't move</i> .) Are you afraid to touch me?
LEAR.	No.
GHOST.	Feel.

LEAR. (*Hesitates. Feels*). Yes, thin.  
 GHOST. I'm afraid. Let me stay with you, keep me here, please.  
 LEAR. Yes, yes, poor boy. Lie down by me. Here. I'll hold you.  
 We'll help each other. Cry while I sleep, and I'll cry and  
 watch you while you sleep. We'll take turns. The sound of  
 the human voice will comfort us. (Bond 1983, 42)

Lear, frightened to confront his own old age, is able to confront and eventually to touch the ghost of the Gravedigger's Boy. Through the conjuring of the rotting, post-mortem Ghost, Bond is able to postulate an existence beyond subjectivity. In Kristevan terms, the Ghost (and the change of the character's name from Gravedigger's Boy to Ghost after the end of Act One is telling) becomes a border – and “I” who is expelled as subject and object collapse into abjection. Through Lear's embrace of the character, Bond shows that, at least for the former king, acknowledgement of the repressed, of that which has been thrown away is a necessary coming to consciousness. It is only after Lear has been remade into a Christ-like figure, preaching in parables that the character is able to dispense with this abjected double by killing him and being killed in turn as he tries to destroy the wall/border.

In Bond's play, the unveiling of the abject and the ability to live without borders is staged as a theatricalized return of the repressed. Through this play's lesson in abjection, Bond shows that a dialectics of violence, separation and subjugation is founded on material abjection.

### ***Blasted*: (Yet another) “Disgusting Feast of Filth”<sup>4</sup>**

In contrast to Bond's text, which is played out on a grand scale, the dramatist Sarah Kane's professional début, *Blasted*, features a cast of just three characters confined to a Leeds hotel room. Premiered in 1995 to a barrage of hostile and outraged reviews, *Blasted* has been the subject of much general controversy and, since Kane's death, reassessment and the beginnings of canonization. Seen by Aleks Sierz as one of the signature plays of what he terms the “in-yer-face” theatre of the 1990s, the play has become a locus for the discussion of the resurgence of British theatre writing during the decade. *Blasted* appears, at least on a superficial level, to be the degree zero of abjection within contemporary British theatre. On the one hand, as an example of in-yer-face theatre, Sierz characterizes *Blasted*, along with other theatre writing from the 1990s, as:

*a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such*